

RECORD OF INTERVIEW

Subject: James R. Schlesinger
Position: Former CIA Director (1973); Secretary of Defense (1973-1975)
Location: Shearson Lehman Hutton, 1627 Eye Street, NW, Washington, D.C.
Interviewer: John G. Hines
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Schlesinger had formed his ideas about the Soviet Union while at RAND and especially in connection with his work when he was running the NU-OPTS⁸² project at RAND in the 1960s. He criticized the analysts at Langley for working from documents and believing Soviet pronouncements. In their relatively uncritical overreliance on Soviet writings and statements, they failed to consider adequately the motivation driving much of what was written and said about warfare in the USSR.

Soviet leaders did believe in deterrence. They believed that the U.S. would not attack without provocation, and they hoped to deter any use of U.S. nuclear arms. In Schlesinger's view, Soviet talk of winning a nuclear war was pep talk that Soviet leaders may or may not have believed. There was a need to communicate to Brezhnev that a nuclear war would hurt both his country's and his personal interests.

Schlesinger did not expect the Soviet Union to escalate from a small-scale American use of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) along the flanks (for instance, in Iran) to a global nuclear war, but he thought that the USSR might expand a total theater war (in Europe) into a global nuclear war. He hoped that if the U.S. reacted to a conventional Soviet attack with selective nuclear strikes, then the USSR would have refrained from escalating to global use.

Under a certain set of circumstances, the Soviet Union might strike preemptively, according to Schlesinger. The Soviets would not start a conventional war if they were convinced that we would go nuclear. However, if the Soviets miscalculated and thought that we would not respond with nuclear weapons to a "Soviet conventional probe," and if they subsequently learned that we were about to go nuclear, they probably would preempt against our nuclear stockpile in Europe but probably not against the continental U.S. The USSR would have used chemical weapons in a total war and would have employed CW (chemical weapons) before resorting to nuclear arms.

Schlesinger became convinced, in the course of his work of several years at RAND, that the Soviets' strategic objective with respect to the West was to weaken and, ultimately, to separate U.S. strategic nuclear systems from the defense of Europe. The objective was delinkage of U.S. central systems from Europe-based nuclear weapons and,

⁸² Nuclear Options.

from Europe altogether. He devoted a great deal of time to thinking about how to counter and defeat the achievement of that objective and settled on the approach that the U.S. should adopt an explicit and credible declaratory policy of limited nuclear options (LNO). The essence of LNO lay in U.S. declaratory commitment to the employment of selected nuclear strikes against a Soviet/Warsaw Pact conventional attack on Western Europe. It was at the time, above all, a deterrence strategy whose success depended primarily on the degree to which Soviet leaders believed the U.S. was willing and able to respond with selective nuclear strikes to conventional attack. There was a need to communicate to Brezhnev that nuclear war was possible and that such a war would hurt both his country's and his personal interests.

In the 1960s, Secretary of Defense McNamara's "body language" told the Soviets that our tactical nuclear forces in Europe were separate from our strategic arsenal, that TNW would be used to defend Western Europe but U.S. strategic systems would not. The Soviets reacted to LNO with horror and shock. LNO was designed to blow away the idea of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction *and* mutually assured deterrence) and to reestablish the linkage of the U.S. deterrent in Europe to the strategic arsenal.

The Soviets began to think, after the Berlin crisis, that a conventional phase was possible. They later had come to hope that in practice we would not initiate a nuclear war. LNO diminished Soviet confidence in the possibility of avoiding U.S. first use.

The Soviets had great doubts about the possibility of limiting a nuclear war. Schlesinger did not care whether the Soviets believed in LNO, so long as they believed that the U.S. was convinced of the feasibility of LNO. Even if the Soviets refused to believe that a nuclear war could be limited, they would still be deterred because in their view, a limited U.S. strike would lead to an all-out nuclear war, a very self-detering prospect. In this connection, Schlesinger volunteered that he never passed up an opportunity to announce and clarify the LNO doctrine—before Congress, to the press, in official and informal speeches. He explained that the way in which the concept was presented—that is the body language, tone of voice, general seriousness of manner—was almost more important than what was said. He observed that [President Carter's Secretary of Defense] Harold Brown refined the LNO idea with PD-59 but was less convincing in his public presentations and discussions of the concept and thereby may have given the Soviets reason to doubt that the U.S. was serious about LNO.

He explained that war plans, hardware, and declaratory policy—the three components of nuclear strategy—are not always consistent. McNamara announced the countervalue doctrine of MAD but had a counterforce plan (without counterforce weapons). Since Schlesinger could not immediately change the forces, he presented a new declaratory policy that was designed to create desired psychological reactions in the USSR *and* Europe, and he then worried about pushing SAC [Strategic Air Command] war plans in the appropriate direction. He also began to modernize hardware to develop a credible counterforce capability, a process that would require at least a decade to complete.

If the need arose, Schlesinger would have been willing to consider launching a small strike against real targets, such as Henslow radars in the Soviet Arctic, avoiding cities and other targets that would produce large casualties (such as Soviet army divisions), and keeping the number of weapons low (well under 200) in hopes that the Soviet military would not mistake a limited strike for an all-out American attack.

Counterforce was one of the options but was not the entire doctrine of LNO. The essence of LNO was selectivity. LNO was absolutely not targeted at the Soviet political

leadership because, in the event of nuclear exchanges, the U.S. would need someone in the USSR with whom to negotiate the termination of hostilities. Schlesinger commented that he didn't understand [Secretary of Defense Harold] Brown's targeting priorities under PD-59. Specifically, PD-59 seemed to call for targeting of Soviet political and military leaders early in any exchange because early elimination of the leadership would interfere with any negotiated war termination.

The USSR, in Schlesinger's view, had more than parity because it was acquiring counterforce capabilities through deployment of SS-18s and SS-19s.

The Soviets did not imitate American weapons modernization. They did not tailor their forces to meet ours, and they probably would not have cut back if we had. However, we did stimulate their arms programs. We gave a shove to their buildup through the Cuban Missile Crisis.

When asked about forecasting, Schlesinger replied that both sides lacked imagination. Changes in the nature of warfare may have been acknowledged but did not fully register. We had separate offensive and defensive commands. SAC did not think about what Soviet strikes would do to us. The stimulus for change had to come from the civilian leadership.

In U.S. assessments into the policy process, evidence was selected to support prevalent interpretations. Presentations of "empirical analysis" could be totally wrong but totally sincere. For instance, the CIA was grossly underestimating Soviet military spending until Schlesinger insisted on a correction.

In 1973, we put our forces in Europe on alert to signal to the Soviet Union that we were not paralyzed by the Watergate scandal.